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BULLETIN

OF

THE PENNSYLVANIA MUSEUM

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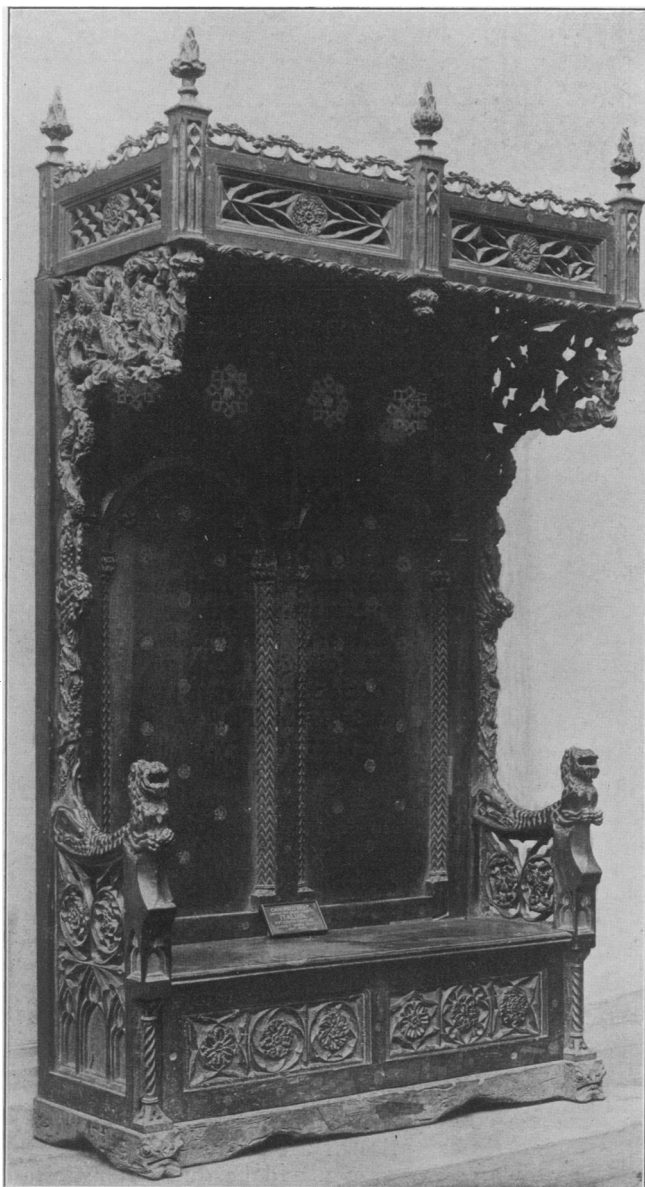
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AN ANCIENT CANOPIED SEAT

By purchase, the Pennsylvania Museum has recently acquired a canopied seat of great interest and considerable antiquity. It is of walnut of the coffre-seat type. The sides of the base are carved in simple ogival gothic style. The front is carved in gothic designs, as is also the canopy. The back is formed of two panels, also gothic, inlaid in white wood with small rosettes and geometric designs of Hispano-Moorish pattern. The space above the panels is decorated with four large designs of similar order and workmanship. The arms of the bench are formed of elongated lions, the bodies of which constitute the arms, their heads and fore-paws forming the front knobs, while the hindquarters curve upwards against the back of the seat and the tail is lost in a wealth of carving, which, as it approaches the top of the canopy, becomes a sumptuous wilderness of foliage and birds, quite oriental in their general expression. The piece is decidedly Hispano-Moorish in type, and the character of the inlays seems conclusive. The wood shows every sign of great age, and it is not improbable that it may go back to the sixteenth or even the fifteenth century.

The history of furniture broadly may be said to be that of civilization. Of all furniture, the history of the seat and its evolution from the bench is possibly the most suggestive and far-reaching. In the fifteenth century, the bench was a long seat on which several persons might sit. Its origin is almost lost in European antiquity, and the etymology of the word seems doubtful. Many authorities derive it from the Latin; others like Littré look for it in the German. But we may be willing to leave these difficult linguistic disputations to lexicographers, for whatever the pedigree of the original word, it would seem that from the "bench" or Italian "banco" have been derived a number of institutions which, as we shall see in the course of this study, play a leading part in modern culture. The bench in the fourteenth century as an article of furniture had already reached the height of its usefulness and glories. At first it was a simple board roughly hewn and set on legs. According to Viollet le Duc, in the early centuries of the French Monarchy, the bench was used as much for a table as for a seat, and he quotes Grégoire de Tours to the effect that as late as the eleventh century seats were unknown in Constantinople, where men sat on carpets on the ground—an usage, by the way, which still survives in churches in certain Catholic countries. But at that date in



CANOPIED SEAT
Sixteenth Century

Western Europe the bench had already been provided with arms and a low back, and somewhat later, it became complicated with a box at its base, being then known as "archbanc," that is a seat joined with an "ark"—"arche" being used especially from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries to describe a coffre or chest. The word "archbanc" frequently appears in the inventories of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of the South of France: Provence, Gascony, the Comtat d'Avignon, etc., but does not seem to have been current in other localities. In the North and centre of France, the "coffre seat" is described by a periphrase such as "coffre servant de banc."⁽¹⁾

The next stage in the evolution of the coffre-bench was the gradual heightening of the back until finally a canopy or dais was grafted on the back and the humble bench became, if not a sort of throne, at least "a seat of honor." At this stage came a lavish display of fine, elaborate carvings, brilliant paintings, gildings and precious stuffs. Once the luxurious piece of furniture has attained this degree of magnificence, the climax of its career is reached by lifting it on a platform, like the bench of King René, which in 1471 was placed in the great hall of the Château d'Angers. This is described as "un grand banc à reille, joust le quel a deux marchepieds en manière de deux degrés." Now we have the seat to which the great lords, when wishing to honor a friend or a superior, invited him to sit at their side.

In 1420, when the Duke of Burgundy called upon Charles VI. for reparation in the murder of Jean Sans Peur, "the King, as judge, sat in his hostel St. Pol in the lower room; and there was seated on the same bench the King of England," etc. By inviting a guest to sit on the same bench with him, a host conferred a distinction known then as "faire l'honneur du banc." That is, it was a symbol of friendship and good feeling.

In 1465, when the "Ligue du bien public" besieged Paris, the Count de Charolais, afterwards Charles the Bold, at a dinner given to the Dukes of Berry and of Burgundy, "gave them the honor of the bench," while he and the Duke of Calabria opposite sat on stools. (Philippe de Commynes, Mem. Liv. I ch. IX.) The benches were disposed according to rank to seat princes of the blood, ambassadors, knights, etc.

Personages in the fifteenth century ate on long tables placed before the high-back canopied seat sometimes hung with tapestry. In the châteaux, at one extremity of the great hall stood a platform on which was placed a bench, sometimes in France called "fourme," more or less elaborately carved and divided into sections, each of which served as a seat for the head of the jurisdiction, the lord and his assessors. The back of the central seat was always higher than the others and sometimes was canopied.

This judicial use of the "bench" still survives in legal language and formula, and has given its name to the court of law and its usages.

In private houses, the bench was put to uses which, while less important, were nevertheless of similar significance. From the fifteenth or sixteenth

(1) Havard in his splendid work, "Dictionnaire de l'Ameublement et de la Décoration," regards it as a mistake to see in the "Archebank" a "banc à dossier servant de siège d'honneur," as certain authors have done, notably Mr. Bosc (in his Dictionnaire de l'Architecture, I 134).

century the bench remained the place of honor, but was placed near the hearth. Every drawing of the period shows it there. The seat, a coffre with a massive back, was too weighty to be readily moved and only under serious conditions was its place changed. Froissard relates, that at the siege of Honnecourt (1339), the besieged threw "stones and *seats* and pots full of lime to better crush the besiegers." The Queen of Navarre, who tells an anecdote of a jealous husband surprising "a noble and honest lady at table with a galant gentleman," rather than make him leap over the bench, makes him leap over the table. Later on, the high back was made to swing. Between meals the bench faced the hearth. At meal time the back was swung over so that the seat might face the table; these are especially mentioned in the sixteenth century.

The practise of subordinating the table to the seat continued until the seventeenth century, and the table remained rectangular until chairs were substituted to the bench. This change seems to have taken place in France between the time when the inventory of Gabrielle d'Estrées was drawn (1599) and the date of Cardinal de Mazarin's inventory (1653), in which tables are described as round.

Notwithstanding these changes, the seat continued throughout the seventeenth century to carry honorable prerogatives. It continued to have a place at Court, in the Council Chamber, in Parliament, and even at the theatre.

St. Simon (1714) speaks of the questions of etiquette raised by the upholstered benches of the Presidents who, during the sitting of Parliament, sat more than one foot higher than the poor dukes, whose benches were less well provided and appeared on the level with mere councillors. It is only in 1759 that benches were taken off the stage of theatres, not only seats of honor, but plain benches, so that as many as two hundred persons might crowd the stage, leaving no room for exits. At this time, however, the bench's majestic proportions had been reduced. It was no longer provided with a coffre and it had lost its dais, even the back had gradually been lowered, so that, in the course of the eighteenth century, it was hardly recognizable. Then it was that for drawing-room purposes it was upholstered and turned into a sofa, while the bench of ancient days was relegated to ante-chambers where alone it now is found, and in churches, where its use has continued.

It is worthy of remark that in the course of its evolution, the bench, from its primitive use as seat, has been combined with or adapted to other uses, such as the "Banlit" that turned it into a bed and other devices.

The most important, as well as most interesting vicissitude of the bench or "banc" is that which appears in early inventories of the fifteenth century as "Banc Armoire," which served to keep treasure, and was turned into a counter in which funds were kept.

It is from those celebrated "bancs," or coffre-counters, of the middle ages, that eventually was evolved the Bank. It has been conclusively shown that the word banker was derived from the "bank" which designated the shop of the money-lender. Nicot mentions a silversmith's "bench," and up till the seventeenth century the expression is constantly used with the meaning both of the actual piece of furniture used and the counter. For instance, in 1477 King René buys from Michel Diny, maker of the "Banc" of Medicis; and when

Piero di Medici's palace was looted in Florence, Commynes says that he got 20,000 ducats which he had "a son banc." Havard gives a number of instances of the use of the word in this sense. Indeed, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries even the word "Banque" might be used indifferently to mean a seat. "Banker," or "banquier" then meant the stuff-cover placed over the bench or "banc."

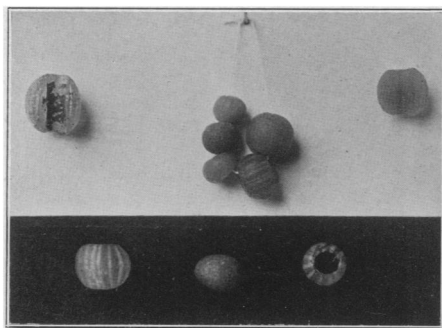
S. Y. S.



HISTORICAL COLLECTION OF AMERICAN GLASS

It has been the policy of this Museum, while endeavoring to gather worthy examples of man's handiwork from all sections of the globe, for the inspiration of artisans in every department of industrial activity, to cover a field not hitherto seriously entered by any other museum—the building up of collections illustrating the history and development of the useful and decorative arts in America. The Museum is now in possession of the most representative collections of American glass and ceramics ever brought together. During the past year numerous additions have been made to the work of early American silversmiths and it is intended to make this collection as complete as possible. In early American iron work also an important nucleus for an instructive historical collection has been formed. Through these special collections, at the present time unique in museum exhibits, this Museum has already gained a foremost position among the museums of the world.

Many writers have referred to the manufacture of glass beads at Jamestown, Va., in 1621, one of the first industrial enterprises in the present territory of the United States, but no previous author has attempted to describe or illustrate them. The Museum has been so fortunate as to acquire a small collection of these beads, which were made for barter with the Indians. A few of these interesting historical relics, which have been fully authenticated, are here shown. They were washed up from the bed of the river near the site of the old glass house. Two varieties are illustrated, the larger examples being made of transparent glass, striped with white, and in appearance resembling small gooseberries. The smaller specimens are of a deep blue color, finely marked with incised longitudinal striations. They naturally show Italian influence since several workmen were brought over from Venice to make them. We have no means of ascertaining how extensively these beads were manufactured in the Virginia Colony, but that a considerable traffic was carried on with the natives may be inferred from the discovery of a considerable quantity of the small blue variety by Mr. Clarence B. Moore, in an intrusive burial in



GLASS BEADS
Made at Jamestown, Va.
In 1621